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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Friday, November 3, 2011

Polisario Insiders Reportedly Helped al-Qaeda Kidnap Western Aid Workers from Refugee Camps

UN Sec. Gen expresses "deep concern," calls for their "immediate release"

Washington, DC (November 3, 2011) — [Three European aid workers continue to be held by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#) after being kidnapped from refugee camps controlled by the Polisario Front near Tindouf, Algeria last week. According to reports, Polisario members in the camps helped the kidnappers by supplying weapons and directions to the victims' location. The two Spanish and one Italian hostages are being held at an undisclosed location. They remain alive, though no demands or conditions for their release have been made, despite considerable efforts by the international community.

[Agence France Press \(AFP\) reports](#) that "less than ten unarmed AQIM militants had entered the Sahrawi refugee camp in Tindouf, western Algeria, where sympathizers of the Polisario Front gave them weapons and helped them seek out the hostages, who were working in the camp." An AQIM mediator further confirmed that the armed assailants were "wearing the Polisario uniform."

[US officials warn](#) that rising terrorism and instability in the vast, lawless areas of Africa's Sahel, which includes the refugee camps controlled by the Polisario—a separatist group seeking to control the Western Sahara—pose a significant and growing threat to US interests.

Recently, Obama Administration Chief Counterterrorism Advisor John Brennan [said](#), "Al-Qaeda traditionally has taken advantage of areas that are wracked by conflict, turmoil and lack of government. It is a safe haven they seek to launch attacks." According to the [International Center for Terrorism Studies](#), attacks by AQIM and other terrorist groups have increased more than 500% in the last decade in North Africa and the Sahel, which has seen an influx of smuggled Libyan arms over the past year.

[The Spanish Government](#) has asked the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to immediately send a mission to the Polisario camps to investigate safety conditions of the thousands of Sahrawi refugees held there, along with nearly 50 other Spanish aid workers still volunteering in the tightly controlled camps. [Following years of numerous credible allegations](#) of illicit trafficking of people, drug and arms, and embezzlement of international humanitarian aid, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees [has attempted to conduct a census](#) in the Polisario refugee camps, but has been refused by Algeria.

** For more background and comments from experts, [click here](#).**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Thursday, November 10, 2011

Experts Cite Progress in Morocco & Tunisia Reforms, Warn of Peril to Region from al-Qaeda aided by Qaddafi arms, Polisario, other militants

Washington, DC (Nov.10, 2011) — Foreign policy experts at [Brookings](#) and the [Atlantic Council](#) noted encouraging signs in changes sweeping North Africa and the Middle East, most notably reforms and elections in Morocco and Tunisia. But they also warned of looming [threats](#) from *al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM), now strengthened by a [flood of Libyan weapons](#) and ties with [other militant groups in the region](#), including the [Polisario Front, whose members last month reportedly helped AQIM](#) kidnap Western aid workers from a Polisario refugee camp in Algeria.

"Much of the news from the region is bad, but there are some glimmers of hope," said Daniel Byman, Director of Research, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution. At Brookings' forum, "[Elections and Reform in Morocco and Tunisia](#)," Byman said that for good news, "the first place to look is North Africa. In Tunisia, we just saw elections. In Morocco, the King initiated reforms, giving hope that even countries of the Arab world that have not experienced revolution may be in line for more peaceful reform and change."

Moroccans go to the polls Nov. 25 to elect a Parliament under the new Constitution approved by voters July 1. "Morocco's Constitution is both liberal and progressive," said Anouar Boukars, Assistant Professor, International Relations, at McDaniel College. "It constitutionalizes important freedoms and equality."

"The Arab Spring has created opportunities to achieve changes that will break down old barriers to cooperation and give the region the much needed chance at economic development and political reform," said Ambassador Edward Gabriel, at the Atlantic Council forum, "[Ripples Across The Sands: The Impact of the Fall of Qaddafi on Security in the Maghreb & Sahel](#)." Gabriel noted, however, "There is also an underside to the Arab Spring."

Gabriel said lack of coordination "encourages tactics by terrorists and insurgents who are well aware of the soft spots" in each nation's counterterrorism networks. "Nowhere is this more obvious than the recent abduction by AQIM of European aid workers from the Rabouni camp run by the Polisario in Algeria." Gabriel noted that Morocco's King Mohammed VI in a [speech Sunday](#) again called for greater regional cooperation, especially between Morocco and Algeria, to improve security and stability in the region.

Dr. J. Peter Pham, director of the Atlantic Council's Ansari Africa Center, warned of a "growing nexus between extremism and criminality" in West Africa and the Sahel. Pham cited "[new reports](#)" of Libyan arms flooding into the Sahel, while AQIM, Boko Haram, the Polisario, and other militant groups are flexing their muscles."

"There is a tremendous amount of weapons proliferation," said Geoffrey Porter, President, North Africa Risk Consulting, Inc., adding that this is a serious internal issue for Libya's new leadership and also "poses a threat" to Niger, Mali, and especially Algeria. "Algeria is once again a security story—that's just a cold hard reality."

Fadel Lamén, President, American Libyan Council, said as Libyans rebuild relations in the region "they will look at who supported Qaddafi." He said "Libya will become very close with Morocco and Tunisia," but its Algeria relations are "frozen." "Libyans felt a lot of weapons and mercenaries came through Algeria" to support Qaddafi.

Atlantic Council panelists agreed that the "continuing impasse between Morocco and Algeria over the Western Sahara" was a "major obstacle to cooperation" needed to overcome the rising security threat to the region.

Lamén said "Qaddafi's departure creates an opportunity for change," as Qaddafi was "a major contributor to failed Maghreb unity, and used the Polisario and Tuaregs to divide." Lamén said this can change now, but the region could use America's help. "Libya's success creates an opportunity to improve security stability in the region," he said, but noted "there is reluctance for engagement in the US."

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Morocco Prepares for Historic Vote, First Parliamentary Elections in the Region Since Arab Spring Began

For FAQs, check out MoroccoOnTheMove.com

Washington, DC (November 18, 2011) — On November 25, Moroccans will go to the polls to cast their vote in historic parliamentary elections following the adoption of broad Constitutional reforms in July. This will be the first Parliamentary election in the region since the Arab Spring began. [Nearly 4,000 Moroccan, US, and international observers](#), including the National Democratic Institute and Morocco's National Human Rights Council, are currently working with Moroccan civil society leaders to train and assist in carrying out the elections as well as ensure against irregularities on election day. To date, more than 13.6 million Moroccans have registered to vote.

So what are Morocco's Constitutional reforms and how will they strengthen the country's democracy? How is Morocco's reform process unique in the region? What will the elections mean for women and youth in Morocco? What is the likely political leaning of the new Parliament? And will His Majesty King Mohammed VI really transfer significant powers to elected leaders? For these answers and more, check out [FAQ: Morocco's 2011 Parliamentary Elections](#).

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FAQ: Morocco's 2011 Parliamentary Elections

Morocco has held free and fair elections monitored by US and international observers in the past. How is this election different?

The upcoming elections are the first following broad constitutional reforms passed by a national referendum in Morocco in July. As in the past, nearly 4,000 Moroccan, US, and international observers, including the National Democratic Institute and Morocco's National Human Rights Council, are working with Moroccan civil society leaders to train and assist in carrying out the elections as well as ensuring against irregularities on election day.



What are the Constitutional reforms and how will they strengthen Morocco's democracy?

Some of the key reforms:

- ☑ Establish that the Head of Government will be appointed from the party that wins the most seats in the Parliament in the upcoming elections.
- ☑ Expand the powers of the Head of Government and the Parliament, giving them broad legislative powers.
- ☑ Empower Moroccans with more control and leadership at the local government level—making local and regional officials directly accountable to voters.
- ☑ Establish independent agencies to guarantee civil and human rights protections.
- ☑ Establish an independent judiciary with a newly mandated Constitutional Court.

Were the Constitutional reforms the King's response to the unrest of the Arab Spring?

KEY DATES

March 9, 2011 – King Mohammed VI announces the creation of an advisory commission tasked with consulting with government and civil society leaders, political parties, trade unions, and youth groups to make proposed reforms for Morocco's Constitution.

June 17, 2011 – The King announces the drafting of a new Constitution with unprecedented and far-reaching reforms.

July 1, 2011 – The proposed reforms are approved in a national referendum.

July 30, 2011 – The King calls for prompt parliamentary elections.

November 25, 2011 – Moroccans vote in national parliamentary elections.

Reform has been under way in Morocco for decades and these efforts have improved women's rights, civil and human rights, press freedom, the business environment, social development, and education. The most recent reforms were in the making well before the Arab Spring began. Moroccan leaders acknowledge that the peaceful demonstrations provided a robust space for its citizens to express their views on reforms under way in Morocco, thus quickening the pace of their implementation.

How is Morocco's reform process unique in the region?

Other countries in the region have suffered uprisings, violent repression, and the overthrow of governments. In Morocco, reforms have been proposed, debated, passed, and have begun to be implemented without regime change, and through largely peaceful demonstrations. These reforms are part of an ongoing process that has made Morocco a model of reform and stability for decades.

Is the King really giving up significant powers?

Like other Constitutional monarchs, the King will now be obliged under the new Constitution to appoint the Head of Government from the party with the highest number seats in Parliament. He will also make appointments in consultation with or on the recommendation of the Head of Government. The current reforms reflect the King's vision for Moroccan subjects to become empowered Moroccan citizens.

FAQ: Morocco's 2011 Parliamentary Elections

What will the elections mean for women in Morocco?

When the King of Morocco came to power a little over a decade ago he publicly acknowledged the lack of rights for women in his nation, declaring, "How can society achieve progress while women, who represent half the nation, see their rights violated and suffer as a result of injustice, violence, and marginalization[...]"

Since he came into power, there have been major achievements for women's rights. Seven Ministries are headed by women, and 12% of Morocco's Parliament are women. Reforms to the electoral law require that a minimum of 60 of the 395 seats (15%) in Parliament go to women. The new Constitution enshrines women's equality as a national principle and provides safeguards and initiatives aimed at guaranteeing their equal status and opportunity in all aspects of society.

What role will youth have in the elections?

Youth in Morocco are a key to its successful future and their vocal activism and grassroots awareness campaigns have played an important role in the vibrant national dialogue on democratic reform and social development. Reforms to the electoral laws require that 30 seats in the new parliament be set aside specifically for candidates under the age of 35 to ensure young people's participation in the new government. Moroccan leaders have widely acknowledged that attention to demands of the youth—and their participation as registered voters and potential candidates—are key elements of the new reforms and the consultative process that produced them.

What is the likely political leaning of the new Parliament?

It is unknown which party or coalition of parties will win the highest number of seats in the election. It is certain is that Moroccans will have the opportunity to freely exercise their Constitutional right to elect leaders whom they believe will best lead the country to implement social, political, and economic reforms. At this moment, lively, public campaigns are underway by a diverse group of political parties promising reforms, jobs, and social and civil protections.

What do the elections and democratic reforms mean in the context of the Western Sahara dispute?

Unlike Sahrawis, people from the Western Sahara, held in refugee camps controlled by the Polisario in Algeria, the Sahrawis who live in the Moroccan-administered Western Sahara enjoy the full rights and responsibilities guaranteed by the new Constitution—including full and equal participation in the upcoming elections to choose representatives in Morocco's national Parliament. In the past, voter participation by Sahrawis in the Moroccan-administered Western Sahara has been higher than in any other region and several of the most active and prominent members of Parliament are Sahrawis.

Isn't there a call to boycott the elections?

As in any free society, there are a small number of people in Morocco exercising their right to call for a boycott. While it is counter-productive for these small groups to attempt disrupt the reform process—instead of actively participating in it—their call does represent the broad expansion of the right to free expression that has occurred in Morocco over the last decades.

How can the US/International Community support Morocco's democratic reform efforts?

Morocco, recently elected as a Non-Permanent Member to the UN Security Council for 2012-2013, continues to play a pivotal role internationally in finding peaceful, durable solutions to conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Its track record of reforms and its ongoing efforts to strengthen its democracy—such as the upcoming elections—provide an example for the region which should be enthusiastically and publically supported by the United States and the international community.

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